St. Bernard of Clairvaux and *On Loving God*

Growing from Fear to Perfect Love

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> *"We love because he first loved us."*
> **1 John 4:19 (NABRE)**

As we conclude this series on the great spiritual masters of the Catholic Church, we arrive at one of the most profound questions of the Christian life.

Why do we love God?

Throughout these articles, we have learned that God purifies the soul through the wisdom of **St. John of the Cross**, invites us into the depths of the **Interior Castle** with **St. Teresa of Ávila**, teaches us through **St. Thérèse of Lisieux** that holiness is found in ordinary acts performed with extraordinary love, reminds us through **St. Francis de Sales** that every Christian is called to holiness, instructs us through **St. Ignatius of Loyola** to discern His voice, and inspires us through **St. Catherine of Siena** to courageously live the truth.

Yet all of these teachings ultimately lead to one destination.

Love.

Not merely human affection.

Not emotion that changes with circumstances.

But the perfect love of God.

Few saints have explained this journey more beautifully than **St. Bernard of Clairvaux**, the great Cistercian abbot, theologian, preacher, and Doctor of the Church. His classic work, *On Loving God*, remains one of the finest explanations of how the human heart gradually grows into complete union with God's love.

A Heart Captivated by Christ

Born in France in 1090, Bernard entered the newly established Cistercian Order while still a young man. His holiness, wisdom, and humility quickly attracted others, and before long he became the founding abbot of Clairvaux Abbey.

Although Bernard lived a life of prayer and contemplation, he did not withdraw from the concerns of the Church. He advised popes, preached throughout Europe, defended orthodox doctrine, and worked tirelessly to preserve unity within the Church.

Yet despite his many accomplishments, Bernard believed that the Christian life could be summarized in one word.

Love.

Everything God does is an expression of His love.

Everything Christians do should become a response to that love.

As our Lord teaches,

> *"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."*
> **Matthew 22:37 (NABRE)**

The Four Degrees of Love

Perhaps St. Bernard's best known teaching is his description of the **Four Degrees of Love**. These stages describe the gradual transformation of the human heart as it matures in God's grace.

The First Degree: Loving Ourselves for Our Own Sake

Every person begins here.

We naturally think first of our own needs, desires, comfort, and survival.

This is not sinful in itself.

It is simply part of our human condition.

However, if we remain here, our lives become centered upon ourselves rather than upon God.

Modern society often encourages this attitude, teaching that personal happiness should become life's highest goal.

St. Bernard reminds us that we were created for something infinitely greater.

The Second Degree: Loving God for Our Own Benefit

As we mature spiritually, we begin turning to God because we recognize our need for Him.

We pray when we are afraid.

We ask for His help during illness.

We seek His strength during hardship.

Many people first come to Christ because they recognize that they cannot face life's struggles alone.

This is a beautiful beginning.

God welcomes every sincere prayer.

Like the loving father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, He rejoices whenever His children return to Him.

The Third Degree: Loving God for God's Sake

As faith deepens, something remarkable happens.

We begin loving God not simply because He blesses us, but because He is worthy of our love.

Prayer becomes less focused upon our requests and more centered upon worship.

We begin thanking Him not only for His gifts, but for His presence.

We desire His will above our own.

Love becomes less self centered and more God centered.

Saint Paul expresses this beautifully:

> *"For to me, life is Christ."*
> **Philippians 1:21 (NABRE)**

The Christian gradually discovers that God Himself is the greatest gift.

The Fourth Degree: Loving Ourselves for God's Sake

The highest degree of love is also the rarest.

Here, the soul becomes so united with God that everything is seen through His love.

We begin loving ourselves because we recognize that we are created in His image.

We love our neighbors because they too bear His image.

Our lives become centered not upon personal achievement but upon God's glory.

This is the beginning of what the saints describe as deep union with God.

Although complete perfection awaits us in Heaven, every Christian is called to journey toward this mature love.

The Love That Casts Out Fear

Many people begin their spiritual lives motivated by fear.

Fear of judgment.

Fear of punishment.

Fear of death.

While holy fear can awaken the conscience, God desires to lead us toward something greater.

Perfect love.

As St. John writes,

> *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear."*
> **1 John 4:18 (NABRE)**

The mature Christian obeys God not because he fears punishment, but because he loves the One who first loved him.

Love transforms duty into joy.

Obedience becomes an act of gratitude.

Prayer becomes a conversation with a beloved Father.

Service becomes a privilege rather than an obligation.

Loving Christ in Others

St. Bernard constantly reminded his monks that love for God cannot be separated from love for neighbor.

Every person we meet is someone for whom Christ died.

The poor.

The lonely.

The sick.

The forgotten.

The difficult.

The stranger.

Each offers us an opportunity to encounter Christ.

Our Lord Himself declared,

> *"Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."*
> **Matthew 25:40 (NABRE)**

The measure of our love for God is often revealed in how we treat the people around us.

Kindness.

Patience.

Mercy.

Forgiveness.

These are not merely good manners.

They are acts of Christian love.

The Celtic Catholic Priest's Reflection

As this series has unfolded, one truth has become increasingly clear.

The Christian life is not primarily about acquiring more knowledge.

It is about becoming more like Christ.

Knowledge strengthens the mind.

Love transforms the soul.

As a Celtic Catholic Priest, I have met people who possess remarkable knowledge of Sacred Scripture, theology, and Church history.

I have also met humble Christians with little formal education whose lives radiate the love of Christ.

The difference is not intelligence.

It is love.

Every act of kindness.

Every quiet prayer.

Every word of forgiveness.

Every sacrifice offered for another.

These are the building blocks of holiness.

St. Bernard reminds us that God does not ask us to love Him because He needs our love.

He asks because loving Him transforms us into the people we were created to become.

As we grow in that love, fear gives way to trust.

Selfishness gives way to generosity.

Pride gives way to humility.

And our hearts begin reflecting the very heart of Christ.

May each of us continue that lifelong journey until the words of St. John become the testimony of our own lives:

> *"We love because he first loved us."*
> **1 John 4:19 (NABRE)**
>
> *"The measure of loving God is to love Him without measure."*
> **— St. Bernard of Clairvaux**

Unless otherwise noted, all Sacred Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), the English language translation approved for liturgical use by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.